

Theatre Review

August 21, 2018

Since the Belvoir St Theatre grew out of the ashes of the Nimrod Theatre Company, it has always been an alternative to the mainstream Sydney Theatre Company and has presented many Australian plays and shows that have a social conscience. Under the brilliant leadership of Neil Armfield, it went from strength to strength and deliberately searched for plays by and about Indigenous Australians.

Some of these productions were brilliant, such as *The Sapphires*, but some others were not so good. However, none of that mattered as each of these plays and events provided opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and actors. This led to our training colleges in the arts providing more places for actors, writers, directors, designers and musicians.



Gradually, some of these artists have become mainstream, although much of their work has been “whitesplained”. However, actors no longer have to blackface or be required to only tell stories of our First Nation people as victims. The plays presented by Belvoir are usually from Indigenous companies. For many years we have watched the success of the Bangarra Dance Theatre, which started as a small group and has gradually become part of our mainstream theatre world.

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) has always been behind when it comes to presenting plays by Aboriginal writers. However, nobody will forget the magnificent, sprawling *The Secret River*, superbly directed by Neil Armfield. He has told of the difficulties experienced by some of the actors in the presentation of that play.

Mr Armfield also raises problems he experienced in directing the latest play from STC, *The Long Forgotten Dream*, written by H. Lawrence Sumner. The writer is an experienced singer/songwriter and also graduated from the directing course at NIDA. In his program notes, Mr Armfield says, “I’m very aware it’s contentious to have me, a non-Indigenous artist, directing these stories. I mentioned this to Kip Williams [artistic director of STC] and Howard Sumner, but Howard knew my work and was insistent he wanted me to direct it. So, I jumped in.”

Within days of the play opening to a standing ovation and universal acclaim from critics, Mr Sumner went public with concerns about companies presenting Indigenous theatre with non-Indigenous directors (*The Australian*, 9 August). *The Long Forgotten Dream* is part one of a trilogy, but he has withdrawn the two remaining plays from STC production. From newspaper reports, it appears there were big differences between Mr Sumner and Mr Armfield during the rehearsal period.

I have directed a number of plays where the writer has sat in and it can be a very difficult, tense experience. The writer and director often see the play from very different perspectives. Getting a play together is a strained process in itself, with egos always playing out on the surface, so I am not surprised by the differences expressed by Mr Sumner and fully support his call for a national Indigenous theatre company.

With that said, I highly recommend *The Long Forgotten Dream*. It is a wide-ranging story of a family and the repatriation of the grandfather whose bones have been found following a long search in England by the central character, Jeremiah Tucker, beautifully played by Wayne Blair. The cast is great, the set is superb and it is all supported by live music composed and played by William Barton. I guarantee you will learn something — after many years of watching Indigenous Theatre, my greatest joy is how much I have learnt.

I suspect the Sydney Theatre Company produces Nakkiah Lui's work because it is very good and often different. *Black is the New White* has been a big success for the company and her new show, *Blackie Blackie Brown: The Traditional Owner of Death*, has been one of my favourite shows this year — a big call because *Funny Girl: The Musical in Concert* from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and *Saint Joan* from STC were both brilliant.

The first show I saw from Ms Lui, *This Heaven*, was at Belvoir's Downstairs Theatre. It is a personal story about riots in Mount Druitt in Sydney's west, where she grew up. Since the success of this play, she has gained a profile as a social commentator, appearing on the ABC's Q&A and *The Drum*. I love her because she is fearless. *Blackie Blackie Brown* is one of the hardest hitting, and hysterically funny, plays I have seen. My favourite moment was the audience deciding that Meryl Streep should be killed. Yes, it was that sort of show.

The debate around Indigenous theatre is part of a much wider discussion about whether particular roles in plays and film can only be played by certain people. For example, only gay men playing gay roles. I don't agree with this sentiment, but will watch with interest as the debate broadens. However, a big breakthrough on Broadway has been made with *The Boys in the Band*, from 1968. It has been playing to packed houses and the actors are all openly gay men.

In the meantime, let's hope the government supports the call for a national Indigenous theatre company.

Frank Barnes is retired, but is definitely never retiring. He left both *Bliss* and *A Taste of Honey* early.